

MISSISSIPPI

Cancer Conference Leads to Changes to Improve Cancer Patients' Quality of Care

Issue

Although the incidence of new cancer diagnoses is lower for Mississippi than the United States as a whole, Mississippi's death rate from cancer was 209.2 per 100,000 population, compared to 180.7 per 100,000 for the United States (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). This discrepancy may be due in part to the health disparities found among Mississippians who lack the means to seek early intervention, do not always understand the explanations provided by medical personnel, and lack psychosocial interventions that can help facilitate a cancer patient's journey through treatment.

Intervention

The Southern Mississippi Area Health Education Center (SMAHEC) contacted each hospital within the southern 15-county area and found that only two hospitals use patient navigators to help cancer patients through the maze of appointments and treatments. After expanding the inquiry to hospitals, clinics, and the American Cancer Society in 24 South Mississippi counties, support groups were found in only 7 of those counties. Several of those groups were hosted by cancer survivors without any type of support from health professionals.

SMAHEC planned and hosted a conference in January 2009 called "A Community Conference to Increase Awareness of the Role of Psychosocial Interventions for Cancer Patients, Survivors, and Their Families," to inform health care professionals about the importance of supporting cancer patients' psychosocial needs. Topics included Patient Navigation: I Can Cope, a type of support group offered by the American Cancer Society; a panel made up of a cancer survivor and two family members of people who did not survive cancer; and Psychosocial Oncology: One Cancer Center's Experience.

Impact

Nurses, social workers, physicians, cancer survivors and their family members attended the conference. Based on feedback from evaluation forms and pre- and post-tests, the audience was fairly knowledgeable about cancer treatment. However, 78.9% of respondents mistakenly believed that "There are plenty of psychosocial support groups in Mississippi for cancer patients." In fact, there are few support groups, and much more must be done to increase survivorship and address the psychosocial needs of cancer patients and their families.

The connections made at the conference have been fruitful:

- One of the conference planners implemented a Gulf Coast Chapter of the state comprehensive cancer program, which plans several educational outreach programs.
- One conference attendee was an inspirational woman named Gloria Johnson, a three-time cancer survivor, who hosts her own support group in rural Wilkinson County, Mississippi. She was nominated for the Spirit of Life award at the state cancer conference, and was chosen to receive that honor last May.
- Another attendee represented the Mississippi Institute for Improvement of Geographic Minority Health, which hopes to establish a training program for patient navigators to reduce the disparity in cancer deaths among Mississippi's minority population.
- The patient navigator presenter, Dr. Robert Gardner, was asked to speak at the state cancer conference, and was able to reach a larger audience.

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